

Potential artists, sportspersons take a backseat because of JEE preparation...Education is also about socio-emotional growth: IIT-Kanpur professor

“The convergent thinking that helped students crack JEE — and which also might help them get a 'good' career — can be too overwhelming,” writes Kumar Ravi Priya

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(A [Lesson from IIT](#) is a weekly column by an IIT faculty member on learning, science and technology on campus and beyond. The column appears every Friday)

Recently, a first-year student stopped me after class and asked if he could discuss something with me.

“I was always interested in playing the tabla, but could not find time earlier. You know how the preparations for the JEE are! I have started practising again. I missed the joy of creating some tunes. Today, in your lecture on Carl Rogers’ theory of the self, I could see how creating beautiful rhythms seems to be a part of me,” he said.

Another student shared how he realised the gendered nature of the world. He contrasted his notions of well-being vis-à-vis that of a woman survivor of an earthquake in Marathwada who was compelled by her husband to undergo a surgical procedure to help her bear children again.

These are two of the many examples of conversations we have in our social science and humanities courses at the IITs. In contrast to science and engineering courses, these help students connect to their own experiences while drawing links to the world we live in.

But a question arises: Are most IIT students keen to engage with these conversations, especially with the pressure and challenges that come with internalised notions of securing the highest possible package?

Like many other colleagues in the IITs, I have been experimenting with ways in which I can help students develop meaningful insights about the human and social world. Both students and teachers have to counter the effects of convergent thinking that the JEE preparation (particularly at the coaching centres) often instils in them.

Potential of being excellent debaters, artists, sportsmen, social workers and leaders within the students takes a back seat in our education system partly due to the nature of the school curriculum and the stress of the JEE preparation.

For some students, the dormant quest to learn about human and social realities reignites as they enter the IIT system. For others, the convergent thinking – that helped them crack JEE and thus might also help them get a “good” career – can be too overwhelming. Here, it is also important to realise that education is defined in terms of socio-emotional growth rather than mere intellectual growth.

Impact of Role Models

It is understandable that just as any other human being, students' lives are also guided by several role models. In the IIT system, teachers, fellow students as well as alumni are the potential role models. They help students pursue their academic and personal goals.

One thing that can help reignite the quest to learn about human and social realities and develop insights about the self are the biographies of the former IITians.

I would like to mention two products of the IIT system. Mr Arvind Gupta (the toymaker) and Mr NR Narayan Murthy (Infosys founder). Their lives present some examples of how the critical questions concerning explorations about self (interest, passion or “who am I?”) as well as cultural or socio-political conditions surrounding our lives cannot be ignored while working toward a career.

Gupta, a 20-year-old engineer who studied at IIT Kanpur, worked with TELCO for some time. He soon started feeling dejected due to a lack of interest in his work.

He has spoken about recollecting the smile on his face as a child when he could play with his toys. He went on to recognise that his true interest or passion was in bringing such smiles to children by becoming a unique science educator who utilises toys and works with students in numerous schools of the country. He also broke the stereotype of only men being breadwinners for the house when he took care of his child at home while his wife worked as a teacher at Fergusson College in [Pune](#).

Murthy is not only an example of an innovator and entrepreneur but also a leader of skilled personnel who has been critically aware of the cultural and socio-political contexts in which his organisations work. One of his favourite books, *Black Skin, White Masks* by Franz Fanon, makes one address the social hierarchies of race and class.

Rebooting the human within may contribute towards the well-being and self-growth of students at IITs during their student life and beyond. IITs as educational institutions present the opportunity for the students to work toward that along with the teachers, fellow students, and the vast alumni network.

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